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ABSTRACT

Although English is a colonial heritage in Fiji, it links the country's different ethnic groups and is the language of instruction for formal education. This paper examines pedagogical and cultural implications of the present primary English curriculum, based on findings from an empirical study of primary English teaching in Fiji. It reviews the materials and methodology in large-scale use in the country and demonstrates how present English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teaching is at odds with both curriculum aims and children's real needs for ESL skills. Innovations in teaching methods and materials are discussed. Contains 8 references. (LB)

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Literacy in ESL: Pedagogical and cultural pathfinding in Fiji

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Presentation abstract

English is a colonial heritage in Fiji. However, it has successfully become the lingua franca between the country's different ethnic groups. Formal education has also been established as a colonial heritage and it continues to be conducted largely through the medium of English, putting literacy skills in ESL at a premium.

This paper examines pedagogical and cultural implications of the present primary English curriculum, based on findings from an empirical study of primary English teaching in Fiji. It reviews the materials and methodology in largescale use in the country, and demonstrates how present ESL teaching is at odds with both curriculum aims and children's real needs for ESL skills. Finally, innovations in teaching methods and materials picked up in the study are discussed.

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Literacy in ESL: Pedagogical and cultural pathfinding in Fiji

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Introduction

Fiji is a small island state located in the South Pacific. The country comprises some 300 islands. 700,000 people live in Fiji, many on the two largest islands: Viti Levu and Vanua Levu (see Figure 1). Two predominant racial groups make up over 90% of the population: ethnic Fijians, and Indians who were brought to Fiji in the nineteenth century as indentured sugar cane labourers by the British colonial government. At the last census, Indians made up a slightly larger proportion of the population than ethnic Fijians. Smaller numbers of Chinese, Europeans, other Pacific Islanders, and mixed-race people make Fiji a very multicultural country, and the population of the country continues to diversify with immigration from Asian nations.

English arrived in Fiji in the early nineteenth century, first with traders and beachcombers, then with missionaries. However, the early missionaries promoted vernacular literacy among the Fijians. English did not become an important medium of communication until after Fiji was ceded to the British Crown in 1874 in a political manoeuvre by the ruling chief to wrest ultimate control of the islands from rival tribes.

Fiji achieved Independence in 1970, and in 1987, after two military coups, the country was declared a republic. However, during nearly a century of British political domination, the English language came into use in the nation for official and educational as well as interethnic communication purposes.

*****
place Figure 1 here
*****

The place of English in Fiji

Although established as an artefact of colonial rule and perpetuated as an official language, English has devolved into a lingua franca between the various ethnic groups in Fiji. It functions, similarly, as a major international lingua franca throughout the Pacific region.

Children in urban areas in Fiji are exposed to English on a daily basis. In the cosmopolitan capital city of Suva, for instance, children need both spoken and written

interactional and transactional competencies in English in order to function smoothly in society. Children in rural and small island environments do not need to use spoken English in the way that urban children do, but they must be literate in English.

All children need good literacy skills in English in order to become educated. Education is conducted in English after the first three years of primary schooling during which time, children are expected to have become literate in the vernacular and in English. Thus, all education beyond fundamental literacy and numeracy depends on English proficiency skills, particularly in reading and writing. Literacy skills in English as a second language are, thus, at a premium.

Education in Fiji is neither compulsory nor cost-free. Not all children are formally educated, as a consequence, although school enrollments are high. However, many of the parents and grandparents of today's children were not formally educated beyond primary school, if at all, so schoolchildren may be coping with academic demands in ESL with which their parents or school supporters have no experience. Therefore, children need to work towards self-sufficiency in their schoolwork, which requires an independent command of English for academic purposes.

The primary English curriculum

English is introduced to children in Fiji at the entry levels of primary schooling. Oral work starts in Class1; literacy in ESL, in Class 2.

The stated aims of the present primary English syllabus are very general:

> In general terms, the aim of the English teaching programme is to help children, within the limit of their varying abilities, to understand and use the English language with ease and accuracy. (Syllabus, p. 1)

The content and methodology by which the aims of the primary English syllabus are expected to be achieved are encapsulated in the prescribed set of materials which was developed in the 1960s for Polynesian children learning ESL in the Cook Islands. This set of materials, which includes structurally graded, audiolingual drills and accompanying graded readers, is known as the *SPC/Tate Oral English Course*, after the course writer, and the present publisher, the South Pacific Commission.

The *SPC/Tate* course was developed by Gloria Tate, an Australian primary school teacher, who had teaching experience in Nauru (Micronesia), and northern Australia. In 1958, she was selected to develop a primary ESL syllabus for the Cook Islands in Polynesia, then under the auspices of New Zealand Islands Education (Pittman, 1981).

She wrote *Oral English* and the accompanying *Junior readers* single-handedly (Pittman, 1981). The language programme was developed as a rigid audiolingual syllabus, consistent with the language pedagogy of the late 50s and early 60s, which insisted on the primacy of speaking skills over literacy. Here is a page from Book 2 of the oral component of *Oral English*:

*****
put Figure 2 here
*****

The *SPC/Tate English Language Programme*, as it came to be known, was subsequently published by the South Pacific Commission, an organization of colonial powers with interests in the Pacific. The course was widely adopted throughout the Pacific as a pan-Pacific English language and literacy syllabus.

Fiji implemented the *SPC/Tate* syllabus in 1968 (Vakaruru, 1984) just two years before Independence. It served to unify and standardize primary school curricula which had depended on a variety of colonial syllabi, utilizing Australian, New Zealand, British, and even African materials (personal communication, Sereima Lumelume, IOE, USP). The timing of the adoption of the *SPC/Tate* course, introduced as a Pacific English syllabus to a nation just gaining political independence, helped the *SPC/Tate* to become a hallmark of primary education in Fiji.

Cultural and pedagogical implications of the present primary English curriculum:

By the late 1960s the prevailing thinking about second language teaching methodology had begun to shift away from the concept of a single method as the main pedagogical approach (Stern, 1983). Furthermore audiolingualism, the theory on which the *SPC/Tate* course is based, had come under heavy fire for its demonstrated inadequacies as a pedagogical approach to language teaching. More cognitive, communicative and eclectic approaches were coming into international favour.

However, due to prevailing political and economic circumstances, the *SPC/Tate* syllabus materials have seen only cosmetic revision since their inception in the late 1960s, although the many weaknesses of the pedagogical approach on which they are based, audiolingualism, have been clearly pointed out.

The audiolingual approach was, in any case, a poor choice of method to effectively implement in Fiji. The corps of local primary school teachers receive only basic teacher education, and untrained teachers are hired where qualified teachers are unavailable. Local teachers' proficiency in English is non-native, and they cannot be expected to provide flawless models of the pronunciation and derivative grammatical patterns given priority in an audiolingual syllabus.

Furthermore, the stated priority of oral/aural over literacy skills in the *SPC/Tate* syllabus is counter to the real needs of schoolchildren in Fiji who require good ESL literacy skills. Real needs for English are not clearly addressed in the general aims of the primary ESL curriculum, and the aims are not adequately fulfilled by the instructional approach and materials set out in the curriculum which stress unquestioning and unthinking oral repetition and reduce the role of reading to that of reinforcement of learned structures and vocabulary. These discontinuities in needs, aims, and teaching programme constitute a serious problem.

Nor are ESL literacy skills, a top priority in children's real language needs, encouraged in the *SPC/Tate Junior Readers*. In fact, the idea of "story" is almost nonexistent in the readers. Also, the characters used in the stories are unlikely: they have foreign names,

such as Peter, Ken and Mary, and are drawn as composite Pacific people, who are not readily culturally identifiable. Here are two pages from the *SPC/Tate Junior Readers:*

*****

put Figures 3 & 4 here

*****

Reading stories such as these is not meaningful for children: there is no real story, and there are no real people.

Story books ought to be very important in ESL education in Fiji. Forcing minimally qualified teachers to present the bulk of language input orally instead of through well-written books is unwise. Their spoken standards of English are varied and imperfect and do not offer the best model of the language. Furthermore, teachers switch easily into vernacular explanations when real communication is needed, so their use of oral English in the classroom is often not communicative.

The *SPC/Tate* has become a tool on which poorly trained and untrained teachers have become dependent. The syllabus is lock-step: teachers are told what to do. The administrative efficacy of the programme is somehow thought to compensate for its pedagogical shortcomings.

The *SPC/Tate* has become entrenched in the primary ESL curriculum in Fiji, although alternative story-based ESL programmes have been shown to be more effective for the teaching of English in research conducted in Fiji (Elley, 1984; Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). In a study undertaken in Fiji in 1979 known as the *Book Flood experiment*, 250 story books were given to classes in two experimental groups against a control group following the unsupplemented *SPC/Tate* programme. It was found that children who followed the shared reading approach in one of the book flood groups made the best progress in tests of English proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). This research has spurred development of innovative shared reading, story-based language and literacy programmes at the University of the South Pacific.

Innovations in primary ESL literacy programmes

The Primary Reading Project, directed by Barbara Moore and based in the Institute of Education at the University of the South Pacific, has been working for over a decade towards building and introducing good language programmes suitable for Pacific Island children. This project, which encompasses both vernacular and English language and literacy development, has contributed to the South Pacific Literacy Project which was introduced after the military coups in 1987 to ensure the continuation of literacy work in tumultuous political times. The approach to language and literacy development supported by these IOE-based projects is based on good children's literature which is introduced through blown-up books and shared reading. The programme emphasizes whole language learning and promotes experience-based literacy resources such as rhymes, songs and poetry.

These projects have established pockets in Fiji and other Pacific island countries where whole language learning in the vernacular and in English is being sympathetically trialled. Education officials in Fiji have slowly acknowledged and begun to pilot as an "enrichment programme" the Primary Reading Project's *Ready to Read* literacy course. The recommended reading materials include children's story books from New Zealand and a few published Pacific stories which were originally created as handmade books by local teachers.

Here are sample pages from two locally-produced books.

*****
place Figures 5 & 6 here
*****

Fiji's official incorporation of the extensive IOE-based literacy project work has been tentative and slow. A recent survey indicates that only 18.1% of primary schools in Fiji are using supplementary story books; these, then, are the schools equipped for the *Ready to Read* course. On the other hand, 94.7% of primary schools are still using the *SPC/Tate* course.

But success is relative. Teachers have made it clear that they are keen to learn more about the enrichment programme and shared reading and their comments indicate that children are enjoying the alternative language and literacy programme. Assessments of *Ready to Read* trial classes indicate that not only attitudes towards language and literacy are improving but so is proficiency in English language skills (Walker & Elley, in press).

There are many political and economic hurdles blocking the largescale use of the well-researched and well-organized language and literacy approach advocated by the IOE. Books are expensive. Book-based language programmes require lots of books, and, accordingly, lots of money. Teachers need to upgrade their skills in order to effectively teach what is for them a radically new language programme. But communication is a problem: in a country of 300 islands, it is expensive and difficult to provide teachers with new ideas, better training and more materials.

Conclusion

Given Fiji's historical choice to educate its children in English, where is the nation in its pedagogical and cultural pathfinding?

This paper proposes that the real ESL needs of primary school children in Fiji are:

1. literacy and comprehension skills for academic purposes, and

2. oral and written communication skills, particularly for urban children.

These needs are not clearly identified to teachers in the primary curriculum aims as they are presently stated. Moreover, real ESL needs are not being addressed in either the curriculum aims or the teaching materials prescribed in the primary syllabus.

There is a mismatch between the stated general aims of the present primary curriculum and the nature of the prescribed teaching materials, which are based on a single-method concept, and on an outdated and inadequate language teaching method: audiolingualism. ESL teachers quite simply will not be able to meet curriculum aims with these materials.

Nor do present materials adequately reflect cultural reality. This is being addressed in the locally written and illustrated story books used in the *Ready to Read* programme that is being trialled very successfully in select schools around the country. However, the New Zealand story books, which make up the bulk of new reading materials and are pedagogically a most welcome addition to prescribed materials, obviously do not reflect cultural life in Fiji. How does a small Pacific country solve this problem?

Experience-based writing done by local teachers, writers and the children themselves is certainly promoted as an integral part of the IOE-based language and literacy projects. This, along with teacher-made resources based on rhymes, songs and poems provide much-needed and relevant resources. But teachers need to be given the opportunities to develop their skills in creating these resources. In small rural and island communities, this requires expensive teacher development workshops which consume both time and travel money. But such professional development workshops must be supported and promoted.

A co-ordinated effort is needed among Pacific Island nations to encourage and produce local handmade books which can be considered for publication and regional distribution. This would promote culturally realistic as opposed to artificially homogenized Pacific literature by decentralizing the notion of Pacific identity. Barbara Moore and Sereima Lumelume, the project workers at the IOE, regularly hold book production workshops where local books are made with cheap and available materials. But these book-making workshops are conducted on a limited regional scale. The co-operative Pacific-wide creation of good children's literature needs to be sanctioned as policy and it needs serious economic support. This is a tall order for small island states with third world economies.

Fiji's biggest problem, the need for a revised and realistic primary ESL curriculum that responds to schoolchildren's real needs for English would be pedagogically although not altogether culturally addressed with the introduction of the enrichment programme presently being trialled around the country. But implementation of a book-based English language and literacy curriculum means money. And the production of locally-written stories to culturally supplement the enrichment programme means more money as well as political commitment.

Fiji's path toward education in the twenty-first century is fraught with policy and financial problems. But the direction of the road ahead is clear.

Notes:

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I am indebted to Barbara Moore, Director of the South Pacific Literacy Project, for her helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

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Biodata

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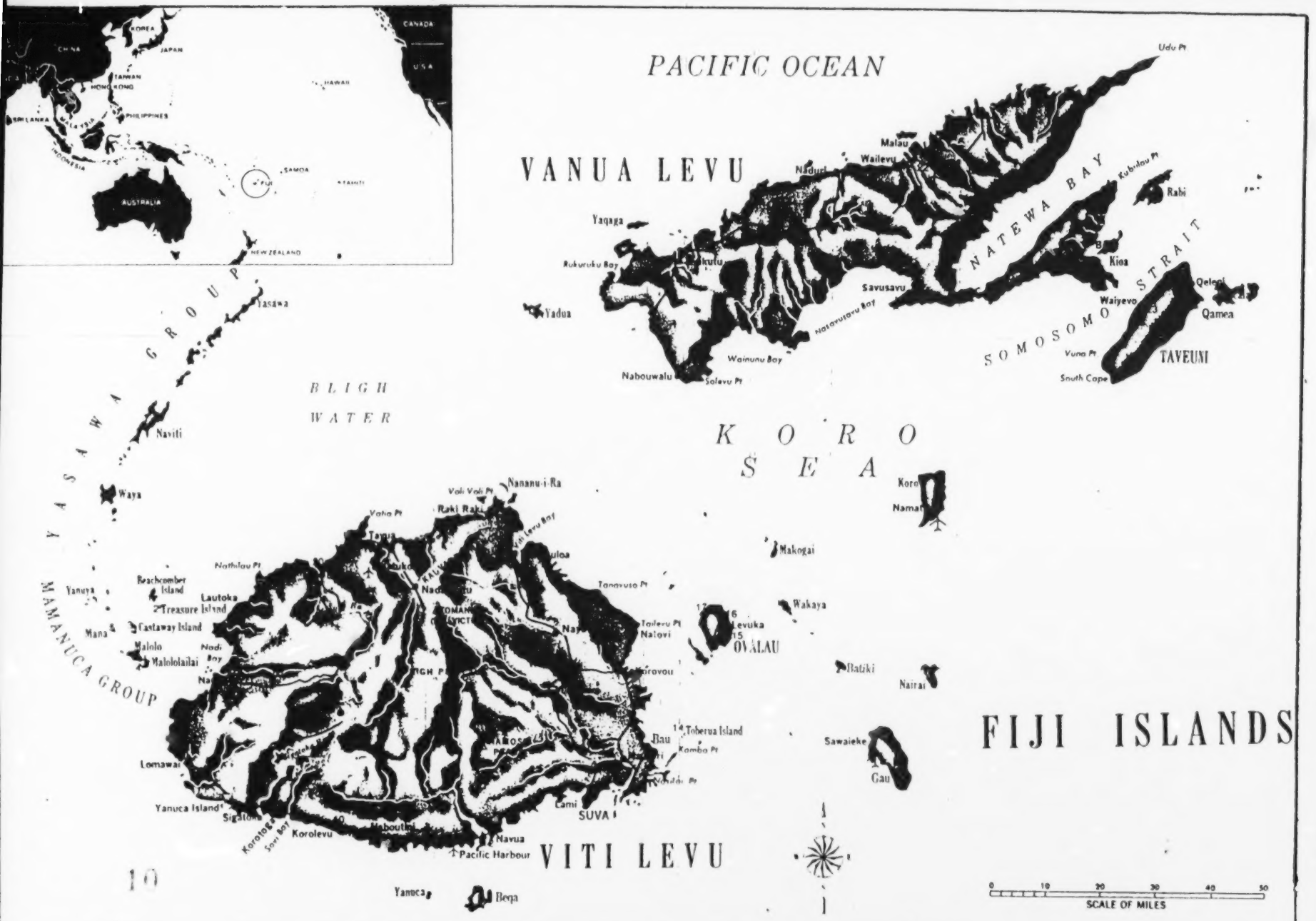

Figure 1

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ate, G.M. (1966). Oral English (Book 2). Wellington, N.Z: AH & AW Reed / Islands Education Division.

SET FIFTY-THREE

I. SPEECH TRAINING.

1. Guess the sounds: Put your lips, teeth and tongue into the shape for — *f* or *v*, *th*, *p* or *b*, *t*, *m*, *sh*, *oo*, *ee*, *ah*, *er*.
   Let the children guess the sounds. Let the class make them.
2. Sing a song to *La*. Sing another to *Ra*.

II. LESSON 53A

Revision:

1. He — she — he — he — she — she.

New Item:

-Is	-A -X	↗HERE? ↗THERE? etc.	↘YES, ↘NO,	-he/she	↘IS. ↘IS-n't.

Presentation:

2. Draw a circle on the floor, large enough for you and four children to stand in.

   TEACHER: Come here, A/B/X/Y. Stand here.
   Point to four different places in the room.
   Call four children.

   TEACHER: Stand there, please, A. Stand there, please, Z.
   Etc. That's good.
   Is A here? Yes, she is.
   Is B here? Yes, she is.
   Is C there? Yes, she is. Is D there?

   CLASS: Yes, she is.

   TEACHER: Yes, she is.
   Is X here? Yes, he is.
   Is Y here? Yes, he is.
   Is Z there? Yes, he is. Is W there?

   CLASS: Yes, he is.

   TEACHER: Yes, he is.

Drills:

3. Ask questions: "Is E/F/P/R/etc. there?" as you point.
   CLASS: — Yes, he/she is. No, he/she isn't.
4. Class-division drill: Five children stand on the floor.
   As you point to each, half the class asks and the other half answers questions.

III. LESSON 53B

Revision:

1. When marking the roll, sometimes ask: "Is X/etc. here?"
   The class answers: "Yes, he/she is" or "No, he/she isn't."
   They will soon understand that *here* means *in this room* or at school, and that they need not always touch the person.
2. *He — she — it.*
   Point to seven or eight girls. Then point to seven or eight boys. Then point to seven or eight objects, e.g., a basket, a book, a cupboard, a flower, a cup, etc. Then show pictures of animals. Say 'She" for each girl, "He" for each boy, "It" for each object and "It" for each animal.
   Get the class to say: "He", "She", or "It" when you point to similar things.
3. Is this/that a leaf/etc.? Yes, it is.
   No, it isn't.
4. Imperative Drill using three verbs.

Figure 2

te, G.M. (1982). Junior Reader 1 (revised edition).
Nouméa: SPC.

Anna: "I want a dress.
Look at this dress, Mary.
I want this dress.
Here's my mother.
My mother is coming.
I want this dress,
Mother."

Mother: "No, Anna, no."

Anna: "Oh, Mother."

Mother: "That's Tom.
That's Anna.
That's Ken."

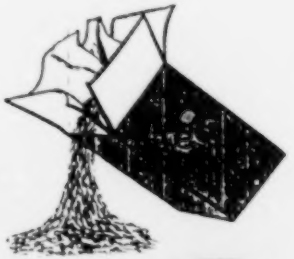
Tom is walking.
Anna is walking.
Mother is laughing.
Ken is laughing.

Ken: "Look, Mother.
I'm coming."

Figure 3.

Tate, 9.M. (1982). Junior Reader 3 (Revised edition).
Noumea : SPC.

This is tea.
Do you like tea?



This is milk.
It's coconut milk.
Do you like coconut milk?

This is water.
This is a cup of water.
Do you like water?

This is a cup of tea.
Do you like tea?

This is a tin of milk.
Do you like milk?

Mother likes tea.
Father likes tea, too.
They want a cup of tea.

Mother: "Oh, Anna! What's this?
This isn't tea.
It's water.
This isn't a cup of tea.
It's a cup of water."

Figure 4

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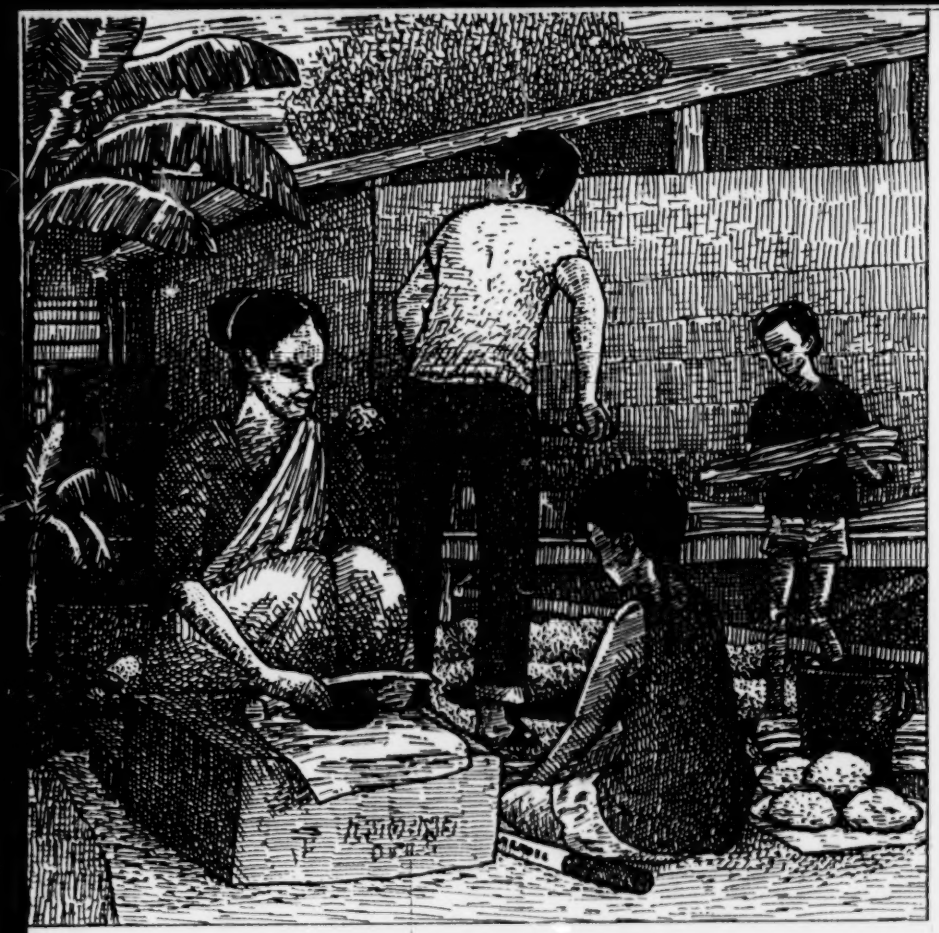
oroya, T. (n.d.) Our New Car. Suva: IOE/USP.

I said,
"Dad, can I draw something
on our car?"

Figure 5

Dad said,
"Don't touch our new car.
Don't draw anything on our car.
Don't poke the car with a stick.
Don't touch it with anything sharp.
You'll spoil it."



The last day was Sunday.
"Let's have a picnic
in the backyard," said Dad.
Kaman helped Dad
dig a hole for the lovo.
Priya helped Mum
to make palusami.

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Figure 6

That evening
they all sat down
to have a moonlight dinner.

Pillay, S. (1984). Priya and Kaman's Holiday. Suva: IOE/USP.